

PORTRAIT

Algerian Enigma

BY A CORRESPONDENT

CPYRGHT

"THIS is the man who's plotting against me," President Benbella said with a smile as he introduced his Vice-President, Colonel Boumedienne, to an Egyptian journalist just over two years ago. Turning to the Colonel, he asked him how his intrigues were progressing. Boumedienne is reported to have blushed slightly: "Very well, thank you."

It is nearly a week since Algerian President Benbella was ousted in an initially bloodless coup directed by Colonel Boumedienne, a coup which shocked the world by its unexpectedness. The shock turned rapidly to mystification: the communiqué issued by the Revolutionary Council, formed less than 12 hours after Benbella's residence was surrounded, made familiar charges against him. He was accused of "bad management of the national heritage, dissipation of national resources, instability, demagoguery, anarchy, lies, improvisation, violation of individual liberties." Above all, he was a "tyrant" wanting only personal power and imposing his will on leaders and people alike.

Yet the Council declared that only one of Benbella's Ministers would be dropped from the new cabinet; that his external policies, in particular, would be maintained and honoured; and that the Afro-Asian conference would be held, as planned, on June 29.

But for those looking on, question followed question. How long had the coup been planned? Was it carefully timed? Was Boumedienne the strong man or were other Algerian leaders using him, eventually to gain power themselves? Was it a popular, or just a palace, revolution? There were the inevitable suggestions of foreign interference: several British newspapers (the French were not so hasty) said General de Gaulle thought that the Russians had engineered the coup to forestall the Afro-Asian conference, to which they were unlikely to be invited, while Chinese implication was also alleged. The CIA—intelligence arm of the United States government—though mentioned later this week, has not been, for once a serious contender.

The actual events leading to the coup—the light snapping on and off in Benbella's bedroom, the charwoman in the palace saying she was only going about her business, and she didn't know anything else, the talks in the street, the disappearance of Benbella and rumours of his trial are now well known. The personality of Boumedienne, his relations with Benbella's opponents, and his quarrels with Benbella, are less well known.

When Benbella returned to Algeria, after five years in prison in France, on July 11, 1962, he was accompanied by Boumedienne, who had been in charge of the Algerian National Liberation Army based in Tunisia since 1960. Boumedienne supported Benbella in his short, bitter, but successful struggle to gain power over the first provisional government and, after Benbella became President of the council of government in September, "returned" to the army, which he set about reorganising from a fighting force of some 100,000 men, to a peacetime army of 60,000. Very soon after his return to Algeria, Benbella declared his total opposition to military dictatorship. After seven years of war, he wanted, he said to transform the army into "a people's army, in the service of the people," to be devoted to the reconstruction of the country. "The soldier," he once said to a huge and demonstrative crowd, "must carry his rifle in his left hand and a pickaxe in the right."

Boumedienne's own rise to political power came in August, 1963. It followed a series of defections, and of personal power struggles within the Benbella government. In April, 1963, Benbella had expelled Mohammed Khider

as secretary-general of the political bureau of the FLN, opposed to Benbella's increasing "radicalisation" of the régime. In June, a plot had been discovered and Boudiaf, linked with Khider was arrested. The next month, Ait Ahmed, founder of the Socialist Front, announced his decision to lead an open struggle against the régime; and in August, Ferhat Abbas, raising the standard of revolt, resigned as President of the constituent Assembly. Faced with these obvious perils, Benbella turned again to his earlier allies: Boumedienne was named first vice-premier of the Council for the first time, he seemed to be admitting, that the army had a political role to play. (Boumedienne, at this time, described the army's role thus: "The soldier must have two arms: his rifle on his shoulder and political principles in his soul," and he added that the military tactic of attack as the best defence, "applies also to politics."). The role became more crucial when, in August, rebellion, led by Ait Ahmed, broke out in Kabylie, and when, in September, hostilities broke out between Algeria and Morocco. In April, 1964, at a national Congress of the FLN, a new political bureau was elected which contained a considerable number of military figures. The reappearance of the Kabylie revolt shortly after the April, 1964, Conference again strengthened the army's role. Benbella crushed the revolt ruthlessly.

Is Boumedienne's *coup d'état* linked to Benbella's more recent attempts at compromise? Earlier this year, Ait Ahmed, who had been condemned to death for his part in the Kabylie rebellion, was pardoned, and just two days before his fall, the ex-President announced that the Socialist Front had rallied to the FLN. What is yet unclear, but vitally important to the new régime, is the attitude of these former opponents of Benbella. So far no major figure has publicly supported Boumedienne.

What of Boumedienne's own personality, and the possibility that he may have engineered the overthrow of Benbella for ideological rather than personal reasons? The Colonel is not a man who seeks, or inspires, popularity. Tall, somewhat ascetic, and chain-smoking, he has yet to make a public speech explaining the *coup d'état*. This accords with the communiqué of the Revolutionary Council, which he apparently heads (though it is said he will name a popular, political figure, as head of government), which looked forward to a return of democratic centralism; and of the end of government by one man. What of ideology? Boumedienne is a strict Muslim—he studied Arab literature at the university of Zitouna in Tunis, and at the university of El-Azhar in Cairo (before he joined in the struggle against the French, he taught in Cairo). When he was in charge of the Wilaya 5 (one of the military districts organised by the Algerian nationalists before independence) he made a close study of the works of Mao Tse-tung, and later, of Castro and "Che Guevara" (it cannot however be said from this that either Russian or Communist influence dominates his thinking).

And his attitude to Africa and the Arab world? The communiqué referred to the new régime's support of Arab and African unity (in that order). The régime has not yet been notably successful in obtaining recognition from either Arab states (Syria is so far the only one: President Nasser's attitude has not yet become clear) or African (Ethiopia, alone, has given *de facto* recognition). And although Algiers has declared that the Afro-Asian conference will be held, the possible boomerang effect of an ill-attended, Chinese-dominated, meeting cannot be ruled out.